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While lacking precise definition, the term 'ethnicity' commonly refers to collectivities that share a myth of origin. Most who apply the term emphasise the importance of ancestry; others, the importance of history, most often migration (*volkerwanderun*) and settlement, but also of political passage, be it escape from oppression or the colonisation of new territory (Weber, 1968). Common to many definitions is the sharing of a 'culture,' the most notable aspect of which is language. Indeed, many ethnic groups are known by the same name as that of the language they speak.

The boundary between nationalism and ethnicity remains ill defined and the logic mobilised by the students of the one often parallels that invoked by students of the other. So often do they overlap that the distinction will not be tightly drawn in this essay. To be noted is that limitations of space prevent even a selective review of the rich literature on ethnicity in the advanced industrial nations, especially that originating from the United States.

Sparking much of the research on ethnicity in developing areas is the tension between state building and ethnic self-assertion. Also important is the tension between theoretic expectations and observable behaviour.

The Power of Ethnicity

While many factors account for the attention given to ethnicity, among the most important is the tension between ethnic groups and the state. Limiting attention to the last century, while attempting to lay the foundations for peace following the First World War, diplomats sought to base political order on sovereign states, a task made difficult by the claims for sovereignty articulated by ethnic groups (MacMillan, 2001). The tension between ethnicity and state building emerged again mid-century, when the collapse of colonial empires bequeathed a multitude of newly independent nations (see for example Emerson, 1960 and Apter, 1963). The leaders of these nations faced political challenges from sub-national groupings: some religious, some linguistic, some regional – and many ethnic. After World War II, the Soviet Union and the United States defended the integrity of states within their respective spheres of influence. But the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union limited the ability of the first and the incentives of the second to continue to do so. The subsequent recrudescence of ethnic conflict in the Balkans and the collapse of states in Africa re-emphasised the magnitude of the tensions between ethnicity and state building.

The Limitations of Theory

In analysing the behaviour of ethnic groups, scholars initially drew on the works of those who sought to describe and explain the rise of modern Europe. One cluster drew on Marx and Engels; a second on Weber (1968), Durkheim (1933), and others (such as Tonnies, 1963). The first focused on the rise of capitalism, emphasising industrial development and class struggle. The second focused on modernisation, emphasising its impact on organisation and culture. For both, the power of ethnicity appeared anomalous and therefore a problem demanding exploration. Attempts to address this anomaly inspired much of the subsequent research.

For Marxists, the power of ethnicity in capitalist societies was problematic because social organisation and political institutions are structured by the means of production: social classes, not ethnic groups, should dominate politics in the modern era. For the second group of theorists, the contemporary power of ethnicity remained problematic because the forces of modernisation should erode its organisational and cultural foundations. Urbanisation should fragment primary ties, replacing them with interest-based relationships. Literacy should enable people to transcend parochial affiliations. And mass participation should strengthen the power of nationalism, leading to the break-up of colonial empires, perhaps, but also to the rise of nation-states.

The continued power of ethnic groups provoked theoretical innovations in both schools of scholarship. Among Marxists, many responded by focusing on the transition to capitalism rather than upon its consolidation. In doing so, they joined their Leninist

colleagues in viewing the rise of capitalism as a global rather than national phenomenon. Major portions of the economies of the newly independent states contain ‘pre-capitalist’ modes of production in which labour retains control over the means of production; to a greater extent than in the centre, economies in the periphery remain rural and agrarian. The forces of capitalism – the market for commodities on the one hand and for factors of production (including capital) on the other – spread from the advanced industrial societies to the agrarian periphery. The table is thereby set for the rise of ethnic groups in the developing nations.

In one variant of this tableau, the forces of ethnicity represent sectoral interests, usually those of agriculture as it declines relative to the industrial core. Thus Gellner’s (1983) justly famous discussion of Ruritania and Hechter’s (1986) study of clashes between the centre and periphery in the process of state formation. In another variant, ethnicity represents a class interest (e.g. Breton, 1964; Sklar, 1967). As development proceeds, a rising bourgeoisie seeks to consolidate its position. In markets for goods, it seeks to restrict competition from ‘foreigners;’ appealing to communal sentiments, it promotes trade protection. In markets for labour, it champions ethnic quotas. In markets for land, it champions the property rights of the ‘sons of the soil’ against the claims of ‘strangers.’ The bourgeoisie thus appeals to communal sentiments in order to consolidate its position in the new economic order. This last variant has also been applied, of course, to ethnic relations in advanced industrial nations, particularly South Africa and the United States, where ethnic groups occupy different positions in the class system (Wright, 1977; Greenberg, 1980).

Varieties of Explanation

Among those who adhere to modernisation theory, some respond to its failure of prediction by re-affirming the power of 'primordial' identities (Geertz, 1963). As the forces of modernisation spread, less educated, more rural, and more 'traditional' segments of society enter politics (Deutsch, 1961). When the rate of social mobilisation exceeds the capacity of elites to control or to shape them, then primordial sentiments displace national identities in defining the collective interest in politics – thus reconciling the co-variation of modernisation and ethnicity.

Others emphasise the role of elites rather than masses in accounting for the power of ethnicity. When competing for office, politicians mobilise political supporters. Ethnic groups provide low cost means for rallying constituents; and by targeting distributive benefits to their members, politicians can build a loyal political base, thus assuring themselves of office (Bates, 1973; Brass, 1985). This approach shares with Marxian interpretations an instrumentalist view of ethnicity: communal appeals are made to advance private interests. It differs in that the goals are political rather than economic.

Combining elements of both approaches is a third, often referred to as constructivism (e.g. see Anderson, 1991 and Hobsbaum and Ranger, 1983). In keeping with the primordialists, constructivists view ethnic identities as a cultural endowment; but in keeping with instrumentalists, they view ethnic identities as malleable. Distinguishing their position is the belief that while identities can be reshaped, they can be altered only at significant cost.

Primordialism seeks to explain the persistence of tradition: as in the writings of Kaplan (1994), primordialists often interpret contemporary conflicts as the renewal of age old antagonisms – ones that antedate the formation of a nation state. Interpretivists and constructivists seek to explain change. Because some ethnic groups are virtually the creations of those who compete for positions of advantage in the modern state, most scholars feel that the latter two advance the stronger argument (see Anderson et al., 1967).

Theoretical Convergence

Mid-century scholars such as Mitchell (1956), Epstein (1958) and Gluckman (1960) noted that in some situations, such as in labour relations, appeals to class solidarity dominate appeals to ethnic identity; in others settings, such as during elections, appeals to ethnic interests dominate those to class solidarity. These findings received subsequent confirmation in later studies by Melson (1971) and Melson and Wolpe (1970) (see also Anderson et al., 1967) and gave rise to the notion of 'situational selection.' They also provided a point of entry for rational choice theory to approach the study of cultural politics.

The notion of 'situational selection' suggests that people organise their perceptions and choices depending on how an issue is framed. Ethnic identities are not eroded (as the Marxists and modernisation theorists once thought), but rather retained; supplemented with new identities, such as that of a worker; and, in some settings, activated. When class solidarity is valuable, ethnic differences are set aside; when competing for the spoils of

office, they are re-affirmed. Viewed from this perspective, ethnicity can be seen as a choice or a strategy, the value of which varies with the situation.

An important feature of the 'situation' is, of course, the behaviour of leaders who seek to mobilise collective action, be it in the form of a labour or ethnic movement. As Posner (2004a) demonstrates, such leaders too appear to choose purposefully, assessing the relative advantages of ethnic mobilisation against other means of recruiting political support.

To invoke an ethnic identity may be a choice, but, as emphasised by Dickson and Scheve (2004) the expected value of the choice depends upon the anticipated behaviour of others. Departing from Posner's decision-theoretic reasoning, Dickson and Scheve (2004) build a game theoretic model in which political entrepreneurs choose the strength of ethnic appeals while anticipating the response of political rivals. A notable implication of their model is that the relationship between policy preferences and electoral support would be discontinuous in democratic settings – something that seems to be validated by Ferree's (2002) research into electoral behaviour in multi-ethnic South Africa. Notable too is Dickson and Scheve's use of Akerlof and Kranton's (2000) model of social preferences – a model that provides a flexible but tractable way of incorporating social identities into the decisions of individuals who are rational.

While the early literature on situational selection invoked dominance, the more recent literature thus invokes contingency. The value of a strategy depends on the expected

response of others. In some circumstances, the assertion of a political identity may be dangerous, unless others also affirm it: dissent abides by this logic (Kuran, 1989). In other situations, affirming an identity may become more profitable the fewer the numbers who affirm it: thus the logic of collaboration. In such situations, no strategy is unambiguously best and multiple outcomes become possible.

One implication is that small changes in behaviour can generate large consequences; choices can cascade, as persons, reacting to the decisions of others, recalculate the costs and benefits of affirming their identity. Thus does Laitin (1998) explore variation in the identities chosen by Russians left stranded in non-Russian republics after the break up of the Soviet Union. Another implication is that there is a role for leadership, symbolism and communication; each plays a role in shaping the expectations that drive the selection of an equilibrium (Hardin, 1995). Thus do Prunier (1998) and others (Human Rights Watch, 1999) emphasise the power of *radio milles collines* in provoking ethnic fears in Rwanda.

A third approach explores inter-temporal decision making and, in particular, the problem of commitment. Commitment problems arise when preferences can alter overtime; to form binding agreements, people must look for ways to demonstrate that their pledges are credible. Such problems arise in economic settings, as when people seek to invest; given the gains to be made from the opportunistic appropriation of investments, pledges to repay maybe doubted, and economic opportunities therefore lost. Problems of credibility also arise in political settings; antagonistic groups may be unwilling to disarm for fear of

being oppressed, resulting in the continuation of costly but unproductive military expenditures.

Because ethnic groups provide opportunities for repeated interaction, they enable the use of punishment strategies to render opportunistic defection costly (Platteau, 1994). Development economist stress that because ethnic groups are endowed with this form of social capital, they can mobilise financial capital for private investment. Thus Greif's (1993) study of the Maghrebi traders and Fafchamps's (forthcoming) research into ethnic networks in Africa (see also Bates and Yackovlev, 2002). By contrast, those who focus on the politics of ethnic groups tend to stress the paucity, rather than the availability, of mechanisms for imparting credibility to pledges of political restraint (Azam, 1994). Because of the absence of such mechanisms, some argue, multi-ethnic societies fail to produce negotiated cost-sharing agreements; given the variation in preferences (Alesina et al., 1999) and the externalities to which public goods give rise (Miguel and Gugerty, 2002), they therefore undersupply public goods. Interactions between ethnic groups, still others emphasise, can also generate 'security dilemmas' in which each group's search for security (as by arming) renders others less secure (Posen, 1993; Fearon, 1996). In such settings, fear becomes rational (Bates et al., 1998; Weingast and de Figueiredo, 1999) and insecurity the norm. Some, such as Posen (1993), therefore relate ethnic diversity to conflict. Laitin and Fearon (1996) demonstrate that peace rather than conflict most often prevails in ethnically variegated settings, however. Bates and Yackovlev (2002) find that ethnic diversity becomes politically dangerous when the size of the largest ethnic group

approaches 50 percent of the population. Collier and Hoeffler (1999b) confirm Bates and Yackovlev's finding, but only for non-democratic states.

Recent research into the role of ethnic groups thus places the subject at the interface between rational choice theory and the study of culture. It treats ethnicity as a strategy, but one that taps the power of symbolism, of history, and of interpretation and rhetoric. By focusing on ethnicity, those committed to rational choice theory are thus challenged to probe not only the economic and political well-springs of human behaviour but also forces that, for want of a better term, we designate as cultural. The viability of this program rests on the degree to which rational behaviour is possible in ethnic settings; and this possibility in turn rests on the capacity of persons to discern and perceive ethnic identities and on their assessment of the capacity of others to do so as well.

Empirical Work

Research into ethnicity has given rise to several lines of empirical research. As in the work of Posner (2004a) and Ferree (2002), one mobilises survey research and electoral data and studies to investigate the impact of ethnic diversity on political accountability and democratic behaviour. As exemplified by Fearon (2003) or Scarritt and Mozaffar (1999), a second employs aggregate cross national data and explores the impact of ethnic diversity on political conflict. By collecting time-varying, cross national data, Posner (2004b) makes possible the measurement of the impact of political conflict on ethnic identity as well, thus allowing for the impact for endogeneity. Still other scholars seek to perform experiments. Thus Habyarimana, Humphreys, Posner, and Weinstein's

(forthcoming??) research in Uganda, which explores the capacity of persons to infer and attribute ethnic membership. By probing the common knowledge condition for rational behaviour, they seek to determine whether ethnicity can indeed provide a rational basis for trust, cooperation, and collective action, as scholars have claimed.

Ethnicity has proven capable of challenging the boundaries of nations. So too does its study reshape the boundaries of scholarship.

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